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Community-based parenting in the Cu'u Culture – Fiji

The parenting styles of indigenous Pacific communities provide valuable insights for other cultures. Parenting involves nurturing children into an environment that cares and provides the 'scaffold' to build up every individual in society. In the process, appropriate cultural values and norms are learnt in the course of parenting. Examples of this kind of parenting can be found in the Cu'u tribe, an indigenous community that live in the Udu Point at the northern part of Fiji. A 2010 study of the Cu'u tribe, using an indigenous approach to capture indigenous knowledge, raised issues that are likely common and pertinent to Pacific cultures as a whole.

Two examples from the Cu'u tribe illustrate the application of the cultural values that support indigenous parenting in the Pacific.

a. Kuku Tupou's midwifery

Kuku Tupou is 85 years old. She has been Cu'u tribe's midwife for most of her life. In her experience of more than 50 years, her delivery record has been 100% successful. And despite her age, she continues to help women in her tribe give birth to their children.

Aside from her proven techniques and procedures, midwifery to Kuku Tupou is a matter of the heart as she plays her role with care and love. She establishes relationship with both the mother and the baby she is delivering, and performs her job with compassion. Her approach includes various ways of establishing personal connectedness at the prenatal phase of a baby's life. The holistic nature of Kuku Tupou's approach may itself be a preventative strategy for the types of social mayhems experienced today.

Apart from performing her service to the community, Kuku Tupou finds happiness and life satisfaction on the knowledge that she is still regarded as a useful and productive member of the tribe. Old people often struggle with the thought of being disconnected from society due to society's failure to recognize them as people who have needs to be connected and be needed by others in society. This disconnection leads to loneliness and makes old people view life as meaningless, lacking purpose. The same goes for the young people. Many Pacific youths are lonely and depressed because the opportunity to be relationally connected has never been provided or lost through modern lifestyles. Relational connectedness is a constant cord of

relationship and bonding between tribe members that is seen in the actions of people in everyday activities. Kuku Tupou's midwifery service and lifestyle is deeply rooted in a culture that forms the model of parenting that has proved its validity through generations in the Cu'u culture.

b. *Ta'ita'i*

Sharing is ingrained in the communal way of life in the Cu'u tribe. This stems from the notion of *veiwe'ani* (relatedness) that underpins *veirairai* (looking after others) and *veinanumi* (thinking of others). Sharing is expressed in many ways.

Cooked food is normally shared through *ta'ita'i*. This is a common practice where a family shares meal by taking a plate of food to another family. *Ta'ita'i* is usually done when there are visitors in the next house or when there is a specialty dish cooked by a family. Tarabe et.al (2008: 53) notes that *ta'ita'i* ensures that "no one is hungry, a visitor is welcome and to ensure that the welfare of old people...is taken care of"

As the practice of *ta'ita'i* takes care of old people's dietary needs, it also ensures that they are made to feel that they belong and are important part of the community. *Ta'ita'i* is a reminder that people are relationally connected, a key measure of a prosperous lifestyle.

Kuku Tupou lives in a simple, one-room abode. While that may not be much, her lifestyle does not mean she is poor. Poverty, from the indigenous perspective, is the absence of relational connectedness seen in simple actions such as *ta'ita'i*, which are expressions of care and love.

These two examples express values that make up the nurturing environment of children in many Pacific societies. Parents use such environment to uphold quality of life and socialise their children into acquiring a consciousness that makes a person responsive to community needs.

Maintaining/strengthening indigenous practices

Maintaining and even strengthening these values and their practice are important in light of the changing socio-cultural character of Fiji. An educational programme with the objective of creating an awareness of the nurturing environment that forms the structure of parenting styles in Pacific communities would help in this regard.

The programme should be aimed at teachers, parents and community workers and other people. It should cover the following knowledge/skills/values:

- Culture as nurturing environment for Pacific people
- Looking out for other's needs
- Service with compassion

Such educational programme should enable participants to do the following:

- a. Compare and contrast the nurturing environment in the cited examples with their own or others' experiences.
- b. Relate issues raised by these examples to the challenges faced by parents today.
- c. Explain causes and implications of marginalized parenting, one that nurtures individualism to suit a modern life style instead of strengthening the traditional notions of collectivism and relationships.
- d. Generate discussions on appropriate styles of parenting suitable for a new generation of Pacific people.

Bibliography

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